

THE

JOEL MUDDAMALLE
FOREWORD BY LYSA TERKEURST

HIDDEN

PEACE



FINDING TRUE SECURITY, STRENGTH,
AND CONFIDENCE THROUGH HUMILITY

THE HIDDEN PEACE

**FINDING TRUE SECURITY, STRENGTH,
AND CONFIDENCE THROUGH HUMILITY**

JOEL MUDDAMALLE



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

The Hidden Peace

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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

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ISBN 978-1-4003-3534-3 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-3533-6 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-3532-9 (softcover)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023941250

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

To Britt,

This book would not have been possible without you.

Thank you for always keeping me rooted in truth.

Loved you first.

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FOREWORD

THE HOLY LAND is so special to me. Every time I land and walk through the Tel Aviv airport, I whisper, “My soul is at home.” This land that has seen so many changes through thousands of years has profoundly changed me.

One of my favorite stops is in Bethlehem. Some people don’t like all the commercialism there. I get that. But if you ever go, please visit the Church of the Nativity.

This ancient church was built and rebuilt over the place where it is believed Mary gave birth to Jesus. If you were to visit this site today, you’d enter the church through a small door called the Door of Humility. As you approach the door marking the entrance, you’ll see that it’s much smaller than a standard door. In order to step inside, you have to bend your body low as you pass through the doorway.

As I entered this sacred space for the first time, I was struck by this thought: *God wants us on our faces before him, and there are two different pathways to get there.*

People who choose the pathway of humility before God choose to bow low out of reverence, honor, and dependence.

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Others choose the path of humiliation instead. One ends up on their face before the Lord by *choosing* to bow low, while the other trips and falls there. Either way, both eventually end up on their faces before the Lord.

James 4:10 says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (NIV).

So I shouldn’t be afraid of lowering myself in humility. But I should be aware of how pride can sneak in and cause us to fall in humiliation.

You might be hesitant to pick up and read a book on the topic of humility. *I get it*. Humility is often one of those topics we set high on a shelf thinking we’ll address it *one* day, but it doesn’t feel urgent for today.

Friend, can I lean in close and whisper something I’ve learned? *Today is that day*.

It’s better to embrace and face our need for humility right here, right now, than to be knocked down in humiliation after a major fall or disastrous choice that echoes throughout all areas of our lives, the lives of the people around us, and the legacy we’ll leave behind.

When it comes to talking and learning about humility, I believe Dr. Joel Muddamalle is the right person to walk with us through this conversation. Joel is a dear friend of mine, and together we have logged thousands of study and research hours on many different topics from Scripture. His humble approach to theology is refreshing to me, and I always learn so much from him.

I believe *The Hidden Peace* will not only encourage you deeply but will help you see your life and God’s ways in a whole new light.

If you fear being outed, misunderstood, or wrecked if you take steps in this direction, you’re in good company. It can feel so scary. Humility is never bought at a cheap price. It will always cost us something, but it will be worth the price we pay. I’m learning that

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humility not only costs us something; it also comes with a payout in the form of peace.

Peace. It's what we're all after, isn't it? Peace in our hearts and minds, in our homes, in the work we do, and in our relationships. As you work your way through the pages of this book, I pray that your heart (and mine) will be able to experience true peace from Jesus when we allow humility to shape our thoughts and decisions.

I want that so much.

I'm praying that you and I will see how God isn't trying to break our hearts or control us but rather make us ready for what he sees just ahead. Humility breeds peace, and peace creates a heart at rest.

Much love from me to you, friend.

—LYSA TERKEURST

INTRODUCTION

I'VE ALWAYS FELT a little out of place, as if I lived in two different worlds. I was born in the great city of Chicago and watched Michael Jordan soar in the air, wondering if he was ever going to come down. There was a Chicago deep-dish pizza spot around every corner and a Portillo's, with Chicago-style hot dogs, five minutes from my house. If you know, you know. If you don't, I'm sorry.

But though I was born in Chicago and was later raised there, I lived in India from the ages of two to five. Yep, I'm Indian. Like, from the country of India, home of the best bread you've ever had—garlic naan.

My parents left India in their early twenties to come to America. My mom was finishing her nursing degree and my dad was working night shifts as an X-ray technician. While my parents worked hard to create a strong foundation for their new life in America, they sent me to live with my grandparents in India. They trusted my grandparents and my mom's three sisters and two brothers to raise me an ocean away from them. I can't imagine how hard that was for my parents, but this is what good parents do, right?

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They sacrifice for their kids. And my parents have a long history of sacrificing for their children.

So during those early years of my life, I ate Indian food, spoke Telugu (a major dialect of India), and lived my best life running the streets of a village called Jangaon outside the city of Hyderabad. It was in this little village that I experienced true safety, security, and stability.

My grandfather, K. M. John, was the headmaster of a prestigious local high school (and later, college). Everyone in the town knew him and, therefore, knew me. I would regularly go with him to work, sit in classrooms, and watch him teach. I knew exactly who I was and where I fit in life. I was the grandson of K. M. John, and my place was wherever he was.

Then, everything changed.

My parents were ready for me to come back to Chicago. So five-year-old Joey (that's what my family calls me) went back to America. I wish I could say that my return to the States was like the Eddie Murphy movie *Coming to America*—a prince of a foreign country stepping foot in America with the red carpet rolled out for him. But nah, that wasn't it. I quickly learned that I was no prince in this strange new land.

The first thing that struck me was how cold it was in Chicago compared to the warmth of Jangaon. The second thing I noticed was that I didn't look like the majority of the people; my skin was much darker. The third thing I realized was the food was different, and everyone used these weird things called forks, spoons, and knives to eat really bland food. In India we used our hands to eat, and the food was spicy—anything but boring. These three things—the weather, the people, and the culture—started to shake my sense of safety, security, and stability.

This was only the beginning of a thorough destabilization.

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One of the first things my parents did to transition me into my new life in America was enroll me in a private Christian school. I expected this, of all places, to be where I'd feel the most comfortable. I mean, in India I'd basically lived in schools and watched my grandfather teach students, so this school thing would come naturally to me, right?

It turned out to be more complicated than I'd expected.

Coming right from India, my native language was Telugu. While I could understand English and speak a few words of it, I wasn't fluent. On the first day of class, I followed a crowd of kids walking into the classroom, feeling anxious since it was all so different from Indian schools. In the corner of the room, a bunny sat in a plastic cage, staring at us as we filed in. Corny posters hung on the walls, hinting at our coming adventures in learning.

Kids started finding seats. I didn't know where I was supposed to sit until I saw four familiar letters, *J-o-e-l*, on a name tag on a desk at the front. Relieved, I made my way to it and felt a surge of confidence, ready to dazzle my teacher and all the students with my brilliance.

The teacher started the day with an icebreaker and asked everyone if they had a pet.

I knew this answer! Without even thinking about it, I raised my hand and said heartily, "Dog."

Life would have been awesome if the conversation had ended here, but it didn't. She had a follow-up question (I hate follow-up questions). "Do you have a pet dog?"

"Yes, *dog*," I responded, with continued conviction, mingled with a bit of creeping fear.

Then came another follow-up question: "So what is your dog's name?"

I froze. My English vocabulary was pretty much at its end. I started to panic. With fabricated confidence I repeated, "DOG!"

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Every kid in that classroom laughed. Not a little chuckle but a deep belly laugh. The teacher giggled. I think even the class pet, that weird bunny in the plastic cage who never stopped staring at me, was laughing at me.

There was one person who wasn't adding to the roar, and that was me.

The rest of that day is a bit of a blur in my memory, but my mom says I came home crying and yelling, "I want to go back home to India, to Jangaon!" I wanted to go back to safety, security, and stability, where I knew my place and everyone else knew me.

That classroom moment is my first memory of being truly hurt. I don't mean just "hurt feelings," like when someone didn't share a toy, or the pain from falling off a bike. This was a different kind of hurt. The kind that slowly makes its way deep into your soul. The kind of pain that makes you angry, then sad, then confused and frustrated, then angry again. It's a feeling that burrows to the core of your being over time, a type of deep-seated pain that actually begins to change who you are. Decades later, I can still remember the shame I felt when everyone was laughing at me in that classroom—that's how profound the impact was.

This change-who-you-are hurt left me with intense fears. It made me realize for the first time that the world was not a safe place.

What did I do with this information? How did I react?

I vowed that I would never let someone put me down or make fun of me again. I promised myself that I would always be the smartest person to walk into any room. And if I wasn't the smartest person, I would walk right out and never go back. I swore to myself that before someone could begin to make fun of me, I'd be witty and cunning enough to flip the script and turn the joke onto them.

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I hated the feeling of being embarrassed and belittled so much that, according to my mom, I became fluent in English and lost my accent within just four weeks. While languages did come pretty easily to me as a kid, I worked *hard* at this. I was willing to do whatever it took to live an “unhurt life.”

Maybe you can pinpoint your own version of this memory—the first time you realized the world didn’t feel safe, when you were deeply hurt, when that pain created an even deeper fear of being hurt again. You also could probably name multiple times you’ve felt this way throughout your life—when pain absolutely gutted you and you had to live with the weight of new vulnerabilities and fears.

I’m pretty sure fear plagues most people in the world, but few of us will acknowledge it. And, as we’re insisting, “Oh, I’m fine,” the fear and hurt we’re living with is robbing us of peace.

So, before you start saying that fear is not that big of a deal for you, hang with me for a second. What if you made a decision not to dismiss fear so easily? What do you think would happen?

I think if we can be brave enough to admit it’s there and look closely at it, we can start to understand it. And if we can understand it and what has caused it, we can actually do something about how it compromises peace in our lives.

The fears we carry can look lots of different ways:

- fear of being exposed
- fear of being caught off guard
- fear of being let down
- fear of looking foolish
- fear of being hurt
- fear of being vulnerable
- fear of failure
- fear of danger
- fear of emotional reactions

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- fear of being found out (examples: *I'm not a good parent. I'm a horrible Christian. I'm not good at my job.*)
- fear of being wrong
- fear of being rejected

I think if we were brutally honest with ourselves, we'd see that we are utterly controlled by some of these fears.

You might have the same reaction to identifying fears as I did years ago. I thought I had to get to a place in my life where nothing could hurt me. I wanted to figure out how to live “unhurt”—to avoid every fear and eliminate every weakness so nothing could touch me—so I'd feel safe enough to have peace.

If only, right?

This mindset is both a human instinct and a hopeless pursuit God never meant for us. As I learned what the Bible says about weakness and the pain that comes along with life, I realized that God never leads us to seek invincibility—it isn't even realistic.

And if we stubbornly resist reality, we'll live in a constant state of frustration. Our approach to finding lasting peace will never work. This is why we have to face reality: we aren't invincible, and we never will be. We all have fears that can lead us to experience hurt or to cause hurt in others.

God knows this.

And he has a way out for us.

He says to us now what he said to the apostle Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV).

This is vitally important for us. Here's why: it lets us know that experiencing peace isn't about dismissing fear, denying weaknesses, or avoiding pain. It's about acknowledging our fears and

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weaknesses and processing our pain in a way that redeems and brings meaning to all the hard stuff we've endured. Doing this brings internal peace, which then flows out to our external lives.

We will never be able to reverse our hurtful experiences. But we can redirect all our hurt toward the God who brings beauty out of ashes and let him lead us on a journey of experiencing his ultimate good for our lives.

Is this how our culture tells us to step into a good life? Not even close. We get a barrage of messages more like this:

- If I pursue (human) strength, I can cover up my weakness.
- If I gain (human) power, I can overcome my feelings of insecurity.
- If I achieve a sense of control, I can stop my life from falling apart.

In other words, if we can just win, no matter the cost, we will find the peace we've been longing for.

It's self-reliance, denial of weakness, and pretention all the way. And it never, ever works.

That's why we so desperately need the peace Scripture leads us into, even if the path it takes us on is surprising. It all begins with *owning* our lack of security, strength, and confidence. It's the exact opposite of self-reliance. This is what it takes to develop a God-given assurance that we can handle heartache—because we've thoroughly embraced dependence on him.

It all begins with *humility*.

The lost practice of humility is how you move toward strength, security, and stability. It is the means to the hidden peace you've been longing for.

You may have heard the saying "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less." This is true, but I don't

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think it's complete. As I've studied humility in the Bible, I've found there are three parts to it: rightly understanding God, ourselves, and others. And the order matters. It doesn't start with focusing on ourselves; it starts with focusing on God.

Here's my definition: Humility is an awareness of who God is, which defines who we are and allows us to rightly relate to other people. It generates a settled steadiness in our soul and a capacity for fulfilling relationships. It gives us what we need to courageously move through every hard place in life and develop every godly virtue.

Humility. I know, it's unexpected. It's overlooked. It's undervalued. And that's exactly why it's so crucial that we retrieve this essential biblical discipline today.

I promise, you don't have to be a "super Christian" to read a book about humility. My friend and mentor Lysa TerKeurst often says, "Imperfect progress is still progress." And this is what I want to invite you into. Are you curious about how to deal with your problems in a way that lasts? Willing to take an honest look at your struggles? Open to hearing about God's way of living with peace, strength, and courage?

Then this is for you.

Let's go see how God is reaching out to us, inviting us into the good life, the peaceful life, that was always meant for us.

—JOEL MUDDAMALLE

PART I

**LIVING THE FRUSTRATED,
FEARFUL LIFE**

CHAPTER 1

MISSING: PEACE, MY MIND, ETCETERA

"IT'S NOT FAIR! Why would they do that?"

"Kids are so mean!"

"We should have done more."

My sons, ages eleven, nine, and seven, stormed into the house and threw off their backpacks, grumbling and huffing and puffing.

"What happened? Why are you so angry?" I asked them.

All three boys started talking at once, and I could make out only a few words—*school, kids, playground, disability, jerks, and we hate them.*

After slowing them down and having them take turns, I heard about how kids at school had been making fun of a kid who had autism. As one of the boys finished the story, tears were streaming down the faces of the other two. They were really sad and incredibly angry, and they wanted things to be different. Finally, Lukey, the youngest, yelled out, "Kids suck!"

I was a bit in shock, but my instant reaction was, "Well, you're kind of right."

I'll pause to give you a little context here. Years ago when my

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wife, Britt, and I were dating, we both worked with people who had disabilities. She worked with kids on the autism spectrum; I worked with adults with dual diagnoses. When we started a family, we prioritized having our kids become familiar with this community. Since my boys had often played with kids on the autism spectrum, they understood the various support systems some of them need in terms of sound or light sensitivity.

Unfortunately, many kids aren't aware of this kind of thing, and when they encounter it, some of them freak out. Fear makes us do all kinds of terrible things. Apparently, the kids at the boys' school were afraid of what they didn't know, and they dealt with their fear by making fun of this kid on the spectrum.

OUR GOD OF KINDNESS,
COMPASSION, AND
JUSTICE EXPECTS
HUMANS, WHO HE MADE
IN HIS LIKENESS AND
IMAGE, TO DISPLAY
HIS ATTRIBUTES.

My boys stepped in and stopped them. "I'm so proud of you for doing that," I said. Then I talked about *why* it was right they did it, saying our God of kindness, compassion, and justice expects humans, who he made in his likeness and image, to display his attributes. That we need to recognize the image of God in others and treat them with respect and dignity. And that we have a responsibility to protect and defend people because we do life with

God. Like Micah 6:8 tells us, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV).

OUR DYSFUNCTION, OUR CHAOS, OUR PAIN

I often think back to Lukey yelling out, "Kids suck!" and in my mind respond, *Yeah, but it's not just kids. Honestly, humans suck!*

MISSING: PEACE, MY MIND, ETCETERA

I know I'm a theologian and I'm probably not supposed to say or write that, but y'all, I'm just going to be honest with you. In fact, let me say right here at the outset that I'm committed to honesty at all costs.

Sometimes, I feel like we are horrible humans. I feel this when I see

- grown adults trolling each other in the comments section of social media;
- a spouse acting out of selfishness and bringing chaos into their family because of their unloving, unwise actions;
- a friend ghosting another friend, leaving them wondering what happened to the friendship and if it was ever real in the first place; or
- someone shaming another person because of their personal belief or decision.

I sit back and simply wonder, *Why can't we just be better humans?*

I think it's because we were created with innate humility in our hearts, so if we lose humility, we actually lose part of God's design for humanity. When we live in a way that is inconsistent with how God designed us to live (humble), there is an incongruity between who we are and who we are meant to be. In other words, we struggle to live out what God intended for us.

IF WE LOSE HUMILITY,
WE ACTUALLY LOSE
PART OF GOD'S DESIGN
FOR HUMANITY.

God created humanity in his image, which gives us intrinsic worth and value. If everyone has this great worth and value, we should treat all humans—as image bearers of God—with honor, respect, and dignity. But y'all . . . are we doing that? And if not, why?

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God also created us so we could know him. I think one of the reasons we suck as humans is that, at some point, we've lost sight of God. If we can't see God as he truly is, it is impossible for us to see ourselves as we should. This means we will think either too highly of ourselves (pride) or too lowly of ourselves (shame).

Here's the problem with both outcomes. If we think too highly of ourselves, we'll view every relationship through the lens of opportunity. We'll see every person as a pawn on a chessboard for us to move around and even sacrifice for our own benefit. When we receive praise, we will fall into an addictive cycle of desiring it and trying to absorb it until it eventually crushes us. We were never designed to absorb the praise of others; we were designed to pour out praise onto God, the only one worthy of praise.

If we think too lowly of ourselves, we will open the door for everyone to walk all over us. Ultimately, we will feel like we don't have a voice and, even worse, don't deserve one.

The longer this goes on, the more we will be robbed of peace. We will never be satisfied in our relationships because we will always be trying to figure out what else we can get from people. Or we will always feel dejected in our friendships because we've come to believe our lot in life is to be the one who sacrifices. The friend who always gives and never receives.

We may end up feeling totally insecure because we are always wondering if people are talking about us.

We may feel like we don't matter to the people closest to us and our needs will always come in last, creating a painful sense of our own insignificance in the world.

We may end up feeling like a failure of a friend because we keep getting abandoned by the people we opened up to and were vulnerable with.

We can even end up feeling guilty for having the beliefs and

MISSING: PEACE, MY MIND, ETCETERA

convictions we do if others look down on us or flat-out cancel us from a conversation.

The result is more anxiety, more fear, more pain, and more confusion than ever before. And this isn't isolated to just you and me. It is a societal issue that transcends age groups and demographics. In a Pew Research Center study, 41 percent of adults ages eighteen and older reported having "high levels of psychological distress" associated with anxiety and loneliness.¹ Barna Group found that 39 percent of adults they surveyed often felt sad or depressed. Another 34 percent said they felt isolated from others.²

I don't know about you, but nothing here sounds peaceful.

WHAT ARE YOU MISSING MOST?

So here's the deal. Go ahead and put a little check mark next to each line that reflects something you want:

- peace in your life
- healthy, authentic relationships with friends and family
- to not walk over other people
- people not walking over you
- confidence to face your fears
- courage to walk through your hurts
- an overall pattern of flourishing

If you put a check mark next to even one of these, you need to rediscover something that was an essential part of the Christian life for the early church but over time has slowly faded into an afterthought. We need to reclaim the lost practice of humility.

Right now feels like that awkward moment in a group discussion after a leader poses a question and it's totally silent. Everyone

WE NEED TO RECLAIM
THE LOST PRACTICE
OF HUMILITY.

is wondering, *Should I speak up? Is it me?* And as soon as you're ready to speak up, someone else jumps in. (Honestly, it's kind of miraculous how this seems to always happen.)

So let me go ahead and push us through the awkward and be the first to speak up.

Friends, this is my public admission. In the words of Taylor Swift, "It's me, hi."³ I confess, I have a problem with humility because it terrifies me. I've run away from humility because I don't want to lose (human) control, strength, or power in my life. But the thing is, I've tried really hard to gain and keep all those things, and all it has done for me is make me more afraid of failure.

I spent many years in school and in theological training so I could add a few letters after my name. *If I can achieve a high level of education, I will be able to put my vocation in my own hands and guide it myself*, I thought. *I will earn a position of control, strength, and power.*

It turned out, though, that the more I studied and learned and "achieved," the more I realized what I didn't know. The more aware I was of my *weaknesses*. Those little letters I had longed to place after my name for so long transformed from symbols of victory into symbols of my secret internal insecurity.

Maybe for you it was a dream job you thought would put you on the path to success. But along the way you realized that the dream job was actually just a job and the dream was actually a nightmare.

Or maybe it was something as simple as having the security of a savings fund for a rainy day. Then the rain came and turned into a tornado that wiped out your savings and then some. The hope and confidence you once had was replaced with anxiety and uncertainty.

One way or another, you and I have tried to take things into our

MISSING: PEACE, MY MIND, ETCETERA

own hands and, in so doing, we've viewed humility as unwanted and unnecessary.

Yet amid all our angst and fear and opposition to humility, *it is actually humility that will move us forward*, into the life we're longing for.

OKAY, BUT FOR REAL . . . HUMILITY?

Now, you may be shaking your head, thinking humility is a threat that will squash your strengths and potential. I want to show you that it's actually a gift that helps the best of who we are flourish. You may think it will leave you unstable and weak. I want to show you it will actually make you steady and strong.

If you need more convincing, I totally understand. I did too. This is why I spent over a thousand hours studying humility in the Bible. At the end of my research, this is what I wrote in my journal.

What I've learned about humility and why it's actually worth pursuing:

Humility refuses to allow us to think too highly of ourselves.

Humility rejects a low and degrading view of ourselves.

Humility reorients our view so we see ourselves as God does.

Humility looks at the success of our brothers and sisters and encourages us to celebrate them and not be threatened by them.

Humility helps us see the value of our work but won't let us define our worth by what we do.

Humility gives us the courage to face our failures and learn and grow from them.

Humility guards our hearts from the seduction of personal success so we aren't crushed by the praise of humanity.

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Humility continually reminds us that we were created to reflect God's glory, not to try to absorb glory for ourselves.

I need humility because, honestly, I've tried everything else, and none of it has worked. I've still felt anxiety about the reality of my weakness. I still fear being walked on and over. If you're in the same spot or something like it, welcome. Hi, it's me. It's nice to meet you.

CHAPTER 2

FROM PANIC TO HONESTY TO REST

I WAS BACK in Chicago at last. And it was better than ever because I got to share it with my wife and kids.

Since high school, I'd lived in Joplin (Missouri), Naperville (Illinois), Sacramento (California), and Bellingham (Washington) for school and work. After five brutal years of living in Bellingham, where I traveled over a hundred thousand miles a year for my job, my family and I had the opportunity to relocate to Chicago. The area had it all—amazing food, historic sports teams, a massive airport, and, best of all, a supportive community.

At the time, my wife, Britt, and I had three boys under the age of seven. Liam was five, Levi was three, and Luke was eleven months old. Today we have a fourth child, Emelia Jane, who the boys fight over to tickle and hug.

One thing you need to know about our family is we have nicknames for everyone. We call Brittany *Britt* or *Britty*. My close friends and family call me *Joey*. We call Liam *Bubba*. Levi's nickname is *Leviathan* or *Bebi* (pronounced *bee-bye*). Luke has a bunch

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of nicknames—*Lukey*, *Tookey*, *Lucario*, *Lukey Bear*—but we almost always refer to him as *Lukey*. We call Emelia Jane *Emmy*, *Em*, *EmJ* (which is my fave—if you know, you know), or *The Notorious EmJ*.

Once our family of five was in Chicago, we loved that we could jump in the van for a three-hour drive to Indianapolis, where my parents lived, for a long weekend. After years of not seeing my mom on her birthday, we decided we would drive down and surprise her. There was no greater gift for my mom than to spend her birthday with her grandsons!

We were hitting the road after dinnertime so the kids could sleep in the car, and as I loaded up the van, eleven-month-old Lukey was a little whinier than usual. He hadn't slept well the night before, so I chalked it up to cranky tiredness. As Britt put him in the car seat, she mentioned that he felt a little warm. But babies often run a little warm, so we took note and carried on.

Soon Lukey became extra fussy and kept trying to raise his hands around his seat straps. We assumed he was frustrated about being in the car and would work himself into a sleep soon enough.

After about an hour into the ride, he finally fell asleep while the two older boys were quietly watching a show on our iPad. We felt like we were crushing it as parents. We played my friends Shane & Shane's *Psalms, Vol. 2* album—starting with the song I was obsessed with, “Psalm 46,” then putting it on repeat until Britt eventually got annoyed and made me shuffle all the songs. Before long we would surprise my mom, earning me the trifecta award of best son of the year, best father of the year, and best husband of the year.

Fifteen minutes from my mom's house, Lukey started crying. His cries quickly ramped up to shrieks of pain. A concerned Britt looked at me, then back at the car seat.

Then Lukey made one more extreme scream and went silent. Without hesitation, Britt unbuckled and jumped back to his seat.

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Everything in my mind slowed down and sped up at the same time. It felt like the whole world was spinning.

“Joel, pull over right now and call 911!” Britt yelled. “Lukey is limp! He’s not responding to me!”

When I heard those words and the quiver in Britt’s voice, fear struck me. It attempted to paralyze me. But I managed to park the van and called 911, saying my eleven-month-old son was non-responsive and we needed help as soon as possible. I didn’t even know the street we were on; I just told them which highway exit we’d taken and that we were in a steak house parking lot.

“Stay calm,” the operator said. “Help is coming.”

Stay calm? Impossible. I was petrified.

In a split second every worst-case scenario bombarded my mind. Was he breathing? Was he brain damaged? How could I possibly fix this? Hands shaking, legs wobbling, I rushed out of my seat and opened the van’s side door. There was my precious boy, his big brown eyes half-open, staring off toward the left.

I feverishly unbuckled him, swooped him up in my arms, and found myself screaming, “Lukey, Lukey! Wake up!” over and over and over. Still nothing. Half of his body convulsed and jerked almost mechanically; the other half was limp and motionless.

As my panic hit a fever pitch, everything else became a blur. I faintly heard my two older sons crying, “What’s wrong with Lukey?” And I caught glimpses of Britt in shock, mouth open, tears streaming, then whispering, “We need help . . . Someone help us . . . We need help.”

THE LORD OF HOSTS IS HERE

I was at the end of myself. I had started this trip with a sense of security and stability. But here in this moment, holding my baby

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boy, I started to plead with God in my spirit to be our help—to send rescuers and to be present in our moment of helplessness.

A deep-seated fear started to whisper in my heart, telling me how useless I was. How incapable I was. All the control I thought I had as a parent, as an adult, had fallen apart in a moment after a single scream. All the strength I possessed could not shake life back into this child's body that lay still in my hands. And any power I had could not force the paramedics to appear in an instant.

In this single moment of pain, I came face-to-face with the reality of my inability. I was forced, by circumstance, into honesty. It may have been the most humbling moment of my entire life.

Then, a single phrase from the song I'd been listening to ("Psalm 46") reverberated in my heart: *The Lord of Hosts is with you.*

At this point, I was more terrified than ever, but I clung to this simple sentence in response to the fear. An answer to its accusations. The next step in my posture of honesty. The fear was still there, but so was an indescribable peace.

It's hard to describe what took place in the next moments; it was a raw and intimate conversation with God within my heart that went something like this.

God, I can't control what's happening right now. I feel like everything is falling apart, and there's nothing I can do about it.

God: The Lord of Hosts is with you.

God, every ounce of strength I thought I had has been depleted. I'm weak and panicked. I don't know how I can do this.

God: The Lord of Hosts is with you.

God, I feel powerless and empty. Everyone is looking to me to do something, but I'm completely at a loss!

God: The Lord of Hosts is with you.

God, I believe you. You're here. You can handle this.

In those panic moments, the primary thing my heart needed to be reminded of was the eternal truth of God's nearness to me.

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The unshakable reality of the presence of God within me. This anthem of truth, “The Lord of Hosts is with me,” led me to face the crippling fear and pain.

It turned out I needed the reality of God’s presence even more in the moments that followed—when the paramedics arrived, took Lukey away from Britt and me, and carried him into an ambulance. I remember losing sight of Lukey’s little body as he entered that ambulance. Not being able to see him anymore reinforced the overwhelming feeling of *I just can’t do anything. I can’t fix this or help him. And if I can’t, who can?*

This is where God met me.

After a few minutes they waved us over, and we saw Lukey moving, coming out of what looked like a deep slumber. The paramedics informed us that he had been crying in pain because he had a double ear infection. This had caused a fever, which had spiked and resulted in a febrile seizure. Apparently, this is common among children; it’s a way the body resets itself when it’s overheated. The paramedics doubled him up on ibuprofen and Tylenol in order to relieve the pain from the ear infection and reduce his fever.

Lukey received care at a hospital for a few days, and then, to our relief, he was fine and came back home with us.

Our life did change from that point on, though. We had to start checking his temperature at the first sign of sickness. If he was at or above 99.9, we gave him ibuprofen and Tylenol and cooled him down with a lukewarm washcloth on his forehead. Lukey hated that part the most, so we called the washcloth his “Batman,” because, of course, it turned him into a superhero.

Even with all these precautions over the next few years, Lukey had more febrile seizures. But by the time he was five, he grew out of them.

Throughout those years of seizures, fear was a constant for us. If we got even a hint of Lukey being sick, our hearts would beat faster as

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we rushed to check and address his symptoms. To this day, whenever he has a fever, we feel fear. We're triggered by the pain of that first seizure, and, if we aren't careful, it can send us into a tailspin.

THE RELENTLESSNESS OF FEAR AND PAIN

The memory of past pain can creep up on us from unexpected places and create whiplash, leaving us sore for days, months, even years. As you read these words right now, you may feel the pain of that whiplash creeping up on you, and I know how that feels. It hurts. And we just want it to stop.

How do we stop the pain and prevent the triggers? How do we protect ourselves from fear?

Our culture offers a few answers: Achieve control, show strength, gain power. Fight and scratch your way toward them, hack them, find a cheat code, fake them; however you can, pursue them at any cost.

Here's the problem though: the human versions of these are all illusions. They look real, they seem promising, but ultimately they are false—that is, as long as we're trying to conjure them up on our own. In the next few chapters, we'll look closely at each of these pseudo-antidotes and why they cannot help us relinquish our fears or pain.

I want to pause here and acknowledge that these things are not exclusively bad or wrong. If we have *zero* control, strength, and power, we find ourselves in a frightening place. Like next to an ambulance with our convulsing child. For years, Britt, Liam, Levi, and I felt that same helplessness and fear overwhelm us whenever Lukey suddenly had a seizure, and I became desperate for a way out of those feelings for all of us. I wanted to gain some level of control, strength, and power to prevent us from experiencing those

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emotions. But whenever I grasped for the “Joel versions” of control, strength, and power, I inevitably came up short, which only multiplied my frustration and stress.

SOMEONE BIGGER CHANGES THE GAME

Let’s go back to Psalm 46 and look at the promise of God that changes the conversation—something we can hold on to when we are presented with false promises of the world: in the midst of our deepest fear or the most horrific disaster, “*the LORD of hosts is with us*” (vv. 7, 11 ESV).

“Lord of hosts” is a militaristic Hebrew phrase used here to refer to God as the King of the heavenly army. But there is a huge difference between the type of King our God is and the kings of this world. The kings of this world often stay back in hiding during war, distant from the conflict. They wield control, strength, and power from a position of safety, far behind the armies they send into battle. God, however, is the type of King who is on the front line of battle. He alone wields ultimate strength; all power flows from him. The King is in control.

The promise of Psalm 46 is the presence of the King in the midst of our fear—the King who personally walks us through our pain. We have a Battle Leader. He will meet us in our panic moments, our living nightmares, and bring his power into the picture.

All eleven verses of Psalm 46 can encourage our fearful hearts as they assure us that God is in total control over all things. The psalmist broke it up into three categories: God is in control over nature (vv. 1–3), over our enemies (vv. 4–7), and over the entire world that is in war and chaos (vv. 8–11).

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As we begin to grasp the absolute ability of God, we see its contrast with our inability. And if we humbly accept our limits, we can gladly rest in his vastness. We can move from fear into peace, into assured faith in the Lord of Hosts.

Now, there's a key word in this foundational concept. Did you catch it? *Humbly*. This is the turning point of managing fear differently in our hearts.

Humility is what flows out of humanity when we

1. see God as he truly is,
2. see ourselves in light of who God is, and
3. see others as God does.

Cultivating humility also helps us see every situation and circumstance as something God rules over and can bring good out of.

This is what Psalm 46 invites us to—a greater awareness of God, which directly impacts how we view ourselves, others, and our circumstances.

Let's take a closer look at how the psalmist proved that we can face our fears with confidence. Verse 2 says:

Therefore we will not fear though the earth
gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of
the sea. (ESV)

The psalmist used imagery of seas and mountains, two symbols that held specific meaning for the ancient Israelites. The mountains were places of stability and security. They were unshakable and unmoving. The sea, however, was an image of disaster and chaos. It brought destruction. What a frightful scene it would have been if the safe, strong mountains were swallowed up by the ravaging sea!

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In contrast to this, verses 4 and 5 tell us that God carries his people not into the chaos of the sea but to the peace of the river: “There is a river whose streams delight the city of God” (v. 4 BSB). While the mountains, the very things that seem unmovable, might be thrown into the sea, God can never be moved; and this unmovable, unshakable, peace-bringing God will be our help “when morning dawns” (v. 5 BSB).

I love this. Each dawn of a new day is a reminder of the help we have in God. Every morning when the sun rises, the overwhelming strength of God is put on display. He is the God who “breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire” (Psalm 46:9 ESV).

Now, at first glance, we may overlook the battle language used here and why it’s so impressive. Part of the challenge we have as readers of the Bible in the twenty-first century is that we are far removed from the historical, social, and cultural context of the Ancient Near East of the Old Testament. If we weren’t, we’d know that the bow and spear were considered some of the deadliest weapons at the time.

An expert archer could shoot a bow from a distance with extreme accuracy. An archer started his training as a child and practiced until he had the ability to pull a bowstring under a hundred pounds of pressure and shoot an arrow a distance between three hundred to four hundred yards.¹ While the bow and arrow were lethal distance weapons, the spear was a lethal mid- to close-range weapon. The lighter version of a spear (javelin) could be thrown at midrange distance, and the heavier spear was used in close-range combat.

The final military reference in Psalm 46:9 is a chariot.² While the word *chariot* appears in the English Standard Version of the

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Bible, the Hebrew word indicates something more like a “war wagon,” a vehicle used to deliver military supplies and carry the treasures or spoils of war back home.

If you were faced with archers or spearmen on a battlefield, you’d be in for a tough fight, but it’d still be winnable. If you saw a war wagon, though, it would change the entire makeup of the battle. When you and your enemy inevitably ran out of ammunition and other supplies, the war wagon would deliver a load of essentials to your enemy with impressive speed. Bringing a war wagon to a battlefield would be like bringing a gun to a knife fight. Absolutely unfair and, for the outmatched opponent, totally terrifying.

What did God do in response to these lethal military weapons? Well, he broke the bow, he shattered the spear, and he burned up the chariot with fire (v. 9). He shut it all down, showing his might and proving himself to be greater than every human battle. I love that last description of burning the chariot with fire. In ancient times, this act of destroying weapons was seen as “a token of peace, and wars being caused to cease, there being no more use for them.”³ God was ushering in peace.

What does this tell us about God? Whatever you and I fear that is far out in the distance or up close in front of us can be overcome by the Lord of Hosts, who is with us. And, if the scariest thing we could even imagine, like a war wagon, shows up in our battle, whether it’s a diagnosis we never saw coming or a relationship we couldn’t imagine being without, God will be with us to help us move through or overcome even that. He is always able to usher in peace.

MARVEL AT WHAT HE CAN DO

What a humbling yet empowering invitation we have to “come, behold the works of the LORD” (Psalm 46:8 ESV) that we may

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ultimately be reminded of the truth that “the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (v. 11 ESV).

Psalm 46 shows us that, while we may not be able to avoid fear or stop hurt in our lives, we are promised the nearness of God to help us face our fears and get through our hurt. Psalm 46 helps us see ourselves honestly so we can rightly see the majesty of the Lord of Hosts. This leaves us in a posture of humility as we become more aware of what we are unable to do and as we marvel at all that God continually does on our behalf and for his glory.

So, just as we are invited to see the works of God in Psalm 46, I want to invite you to come and see how God alone can grant us the peace we long and hope for. But before we can get into that, we need some honest exploration. In the same way I was forced into honest awareness of how little I could control in that parking lot, we need that level of honesty to explore the depths of our hearts.

Now, I won't be forcing you into anything. I'll lovingly encourage you to join me in the exploration. To be honest, things may get difficult as we face longings of our hearts that need reorientation. But all of this, I promise you, is good. It's what I've needed and continue to need. Typically, in order to get to the good, we need to go through some hard.

So, friend, let's keep working through this together, remembering the promise of Psalm 46 along the way: “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (v. 7 ESV).

If you are in the midst of a situation that feels impossible, or in a moment of longing for hope and help, you have a promise from God—one of the most significant promises he could give.

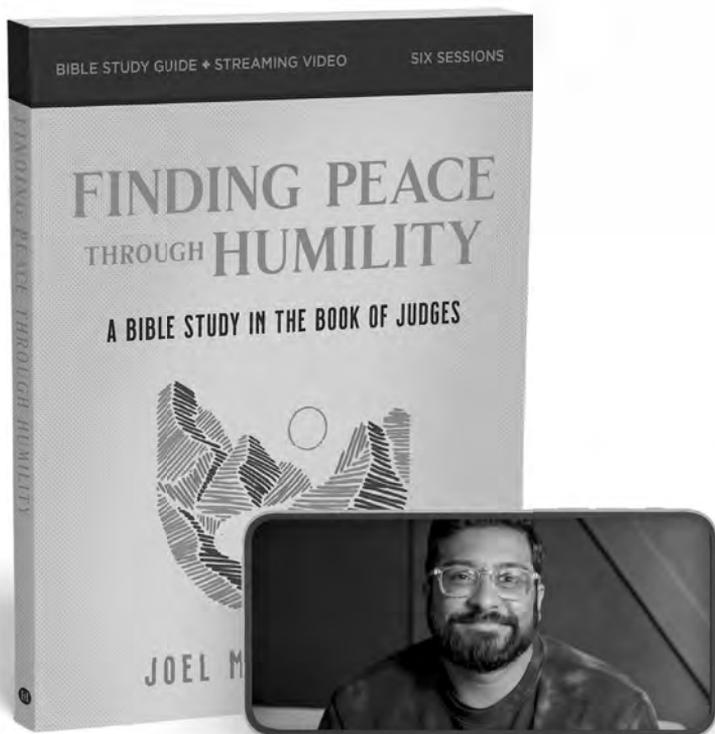
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He is with you!

Friend, tuck this little truth away into your heart. The promises of God are rooted in the character of God. God's character is trustworthy and true. If he says he will be with you, you can have confident assurance that he will keep that promise. Why? Because that's just who he is—a promise keeper. And if he is with you, it really doesn't matter who lines up against you, because he who is in you is much greater and more superior than anything this world will try to throw at you (1 John 4:4).

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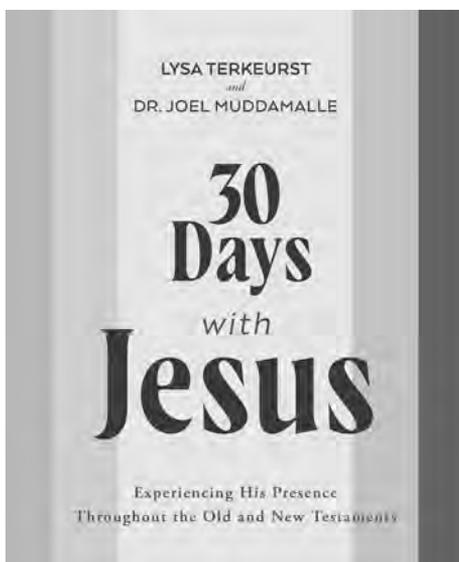
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THE PEACE WE LONG FOR BEGINS WITH COMING TO THE END OF OURSELVES.

We have less control than we want, more anxiety than we're comfortable with, and enough insecurity to remind us of our shortcomings. To experience these things is to be human. We aren't superheroes, and invincibility isn't an option.

But humility is.

Whether we've incorrectly defined it or underestimated its relevance to our daily lives, humility is the missing piece for the security, strength, and confidence we all want. It's time to stop trying so hard to avoid our limitations or overcompensate for them. God has better for us, and it begins with bowing low.

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W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

thomasnelson.com

Cover design and art
by Rob Jelsema

Original package design
© 2024 Thomas Nelson

Author photo by
Erika Melson Palmer

RELIGION / Christian Living / Personal Growth

USD \$19.99 / CAD \$24.99

ISBN 978-1-4003-3532-9



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